

**CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO THE GOSPEL:
INCIPIENT
GNOSTICISM AND JOHANNINE TEACHING ON THE
RESURRECTION**

by

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1. Title

Contemporary Challenges to The Gospel: Incipient Gnosticism and Johannine Teaching on The Resurrection¹

2. Background

Eusebius of Caesarea (A.D. 263-339), “The Father of Church History,” wrote a church history covering the period from the beginning of the church to the defeat of Licinius in 324 A.D. (Williamson 1965:20). According to the church historian Phillip Schaff, Eusebius divided the sacred books of the Christians into four categories (2002:522-523). The first two categories contained the books that were universally accepted (o0mologou/mena) and the books that were spoken against (a0ntilego/mena) by some Christians (Schaff 2002:522). He placed all of the books of our current New Testament into these two categories (Schaff 2002:522-23). Eusebius said that the other writings were “heretical” or “spurious” (Schaff 2002:523). This means the books were outside of Christian doctrine or teaching.

In the Western Church, *The Council of Hippo* (393) and *The Third Council of Carthage* (397) gave a complete listing of the canonical books of both Testaments which should be read as Divine Scripture in the churches to the exclusion of all others (Bruce 1988:232-233). Eusebius

¹ Incipient Gnosticism is a pre-Christian or proto-Christian religion that influenced and competed with Christianity in its development according to Karen King (King 2003:172-3). Incipient Gnosticism is to be distinguished from the more fully developed Gnostic systems of the second and third centuries in that it is looser in its definition and more syncretistic in nature as stated by E. Yamauchi in (Komoszewski 2006:304). Incipient Gnosticism would most appropriately fit in the time frame where it was utilized by the NT writers rather than in the later stages of the writing of the NT where it was confronted (Yamauchi 1973:30).

had popularized the view that orthodoxy was the original form of Christian belief and heresy was a false perversion of it (Ehrman 2003:164-5). These views of the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy dominated Christian scholarship until the modern period (Ehrman 2003:164-167). Prior to the enlightenment, the Bible was seen as the sacred foundation of Western civilization and the literal and inerrant Word of God (Borg 1998:121-127).

During the Enlightenment, English deists began to question theological dogma and religious authority and criticize Christian orthodoxy (Levine 2006:5). Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), a German historian wrote a work entitled *On The Intention of Jesus and His Disciples* (Levine, A.J. 2006:5). For the first time, the book viewed the Gospels as human creations rather than inerrant truth. Reimarus said that the disciples stole His body and invented the resurrection of Jesus and the doctrine of His second coming (Levine 2006:5). Reimarus said that Jesus did not think of himself as divine (Martin 2000:35). N.T. Wright believes Reimarus' intention was to destroy Christianity (as he knew it) at its' root, by showing it rested on historical distortion or fantasy (2002:6).

F.C. Baur (1792-1860) founded the Tübingen school which completely reevaluated the trustworthiness of the New Testament writings (Ehrman 2003:170-171). His doctoral thesis, *Die Christliche Gnosis oder die christliche Religions-Philosophie in ihre geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (1835), was a landmark for research in the field since he treated the Gnostics as the starting point for Christian philosophy (Rudolph 1984:31-32). Baur founded The History of Religions School or *Die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in German. The Tübingen school looked to extra-canonical writings such as the *Pseudo-Clementine* literature for clues to historical developments in the first century (Johnson, L.T. 1996:93). Baur attempted to demonstrate the unity of all religions as different manifestations of divine revelation in history (Hodgson, P.C. 1966:15). Soon, the History of Religions School would expand outside of just Germany (Ashton 1993:17).

Walter Bauer (1877-1960) built upon F.C. Baur's ideas by saying that the earliest Christianity was found in a number of divergent forms and sources, including those outside of the New Testament (Bauer 1971:2-22). This solidified the idea that diversity must precede unity in earliest Christianity (Johnson, L.T. 1996:117). According to Bauer, there was no such thing as orthodoxy and heresy, but competing views existed side by side with none having a claim to original authority (Bock, D.L. 2006:55). Therefore, both Bauer and Baur denied a single monochrome

Early Christianity where everyone had a single Gospel and worshipped with a single voice (Price 2000:265).

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), professor at the University of Marburg, departed radically from scriptural and patristic thought (Owen 1966:41). He reinterpreted the New Testament involving an interaction with incipient Gnosticism in which the NT writers appropriated it as well as confronted it (Robinson 1990:26). Bultmann began a program of "demythologization" of NT beginning with the Gospel of John (Malet 1968:184-5). Bultmann saw a "Gnostic-redeemer myth lying behind the Fourth Gospel (Bultmann 1971:376-77)(Hays 2000:119). Although Bultmann's theory did not go unchallenged, it laid the foundation for future NT scholarship with the discovery of new Egyptian manuscripts (Robinson 1962:287-289).

With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in Upper Egypt in 1945 by Muhammad Ali, scholars now have access to 52 Gnostic texts written in Coptic (Thatcher 1999:323). Helmut Koester of the Harvard Divinity school has popularized the view that some of these writings are sources for the earliest developments of traditions about Jesus (Thatcher 1999:326). Koester has dated many of these writings earlier than the 2nd and 3rd centuries as they were originally dated, and sees them as the source of the canonical material (Koester 1990:49-71,113-187) (Rudolph 1987:42-3). Koester believes that these "other gospels" were a valid and vital part of the life and faith of the early Christians (Cameron 1982:10).

Since Koester, there has been a recent wave of scholars who seek to learn more about the primitive Jesus tradition by examining the Nag Hammadi materials (Thatcher 1999:339). This movement was labeled by one scholar as the “Gnostic return into modernity (O’Regan 2001:227-236).” Other scholars find the ideas in these writings inconsistent with what Jesus taught in the canonical literature (Evans 2006:52). For example, the concept of Christ’s resurrection as well as a future resurrection of believers has come under attack (Wright 2003:532-552). The resurrection has been viewed as a symbol rather than a historical event (Pagels 1979:35-37). Others have seen it as a subjective vision or hallucination (Craig 2000: 187-200). Others have gone so far as calling for “reconsideration” of the doctrine of the resurrection altogether (Riley 1995:178-180).

The result has been defined some as a “crisis” that needs to be addressed (Thomas and Farnell 1998:13-34). Scholars like Edwin Yamauchi have asked the important question if incipient Gnosticism underlies Jesus’ teaching (1979:129-131). Would it necessitate Jesus’ teaching on the resurrection to be redefined? These theories have been put forward by some of the nation’s “leading NT Scholars (PBS Home Video 1998).”

The Gospel According to John is central to this discussion. This is because John’s Gospel, as Dr. Wiles suggests, contains several lines of thought that lend themselves to Gnostic systems (as cited in Hill 2006:280-281). The scholarly consensus is that John’s Gospel was monopolized by the Gnostics throughout much of the second century (Hill 2006:205). For example, Irenaeus Bishop of Lyon in the 180’s describes how Valentinian Gnostics derived much of their system of thought from the prologue of John’s Gospel (as cited in Logan 1991:109-110). In addition, Gnostic theologians are the first known authors to have produced exegetical commentaries on it (Pagels 1989:16-17). It has been suggested by some that *The Gospel of John* did not emerge in preference by orthodox Christians until the end of the 2nd century (Smith 1999:25).

3. Problem

1. What did Jesus teach about the resurrection of the dead in the *Gospel According to John* in light of recent scholarly attempts to redefine this teaching as having its roots in incipient Gnosticism?
 - a. What is Gnosticism? What is incipient Gnosticism?
 - b. What do the Nag Hammadi texts teach about the resurrection? Are the Nag Hammadi codices Gnostic? Which noncanonical texts do scholars say predate Jesus' teaching in the Gospels? What methods do scholars use to determine these early dates?
 - c. How have scholars advanced or challenged the theory that incipient Gnosticism lies behind the Fourth Gospel?
 - d. What role do the discoveries at Qumran or the Dead Sea Scrolls play in helping us understand the background of John's Gospel?
 - e. What did Jesus teach about the resurrection in *the Gospel of John*?

4. Objectives

The objective of the study is to solve the main problem mentioned above. We will attempt to determine what Jesus taught about the resurrection of the dead in John's Gospel in light of scholarly attempts to root His teaching in incipient Gnosticism. This problem can be solved only by addressing the issues stated above (a. through e. under "problem"). If we succeed in solving the main problem, we will have overcome a major tendency to devalue the canonical writings in the place of extracanonical literature. In addition, we will have defended and protected that living hope and motivation of believers to live for our Lord (1 Peter 1:3; Acts 23:6).

5. Delimitation

The delimitation to John's Gospel is not without its reasons. Many scholars feel that Fourth Gospel writer drew on traditions not available to the Synoptic writers (Witherington 1995:37). Theories of possible background influences behind John's Gospel have been put forward by scholars more than for the Synoptic Gospels (i.e. Hellenism, incipient Gnosticism, Palestinian Judaism, etc.)(Brown, R.E. 1966: xlii, lii-lxiv). In addition, the debate of whether incipient Gnosticism influenced John's Gospel or not is far from settled² (Beasley-Murray, G.R. 1999:lv). Therefore, solving the problem of Jesus' teaching on the resurrection in John's Gospel is primary for understanding the background of the rest of the NT and more specifically the Synoptic Gospels.

In addition, the eschatological salvation/resurrection passages named above can be put into the two categories of "realized eschatology" or salvation in the present and "final eschatology" or the future salvation and resurrection (Brown, R.E. 1966:cxv-cxx). Bultmann reduced John's futuristic eschatology to philosophical abstractions arguing that a later editor had inserted passages that apply to a future resurrection (Corell 1958:80-81). However, most scholars see the two views as creating ambiguity and tension. As Kysar notes the tension between the present or realized eschatology and the futuristic or resurrection passages is the fruit of the tension between John and his tradition (1975:213). Therefore, clarity as to what Jesus actually taught or meant will help with the interpretation of other biblical passages. Hence, John's Gospel serves as the best test case to resolve the problem because of where it stands currently in theological research in relation to potential influences and eschatological ambiguity.

² *The Gospel of John* poetically glorifies Jesus as a preexisting heavenly redeemer who descended to spread saving knowledge, then reascended to heaven. Since several Nag Hammadi texts tell the same story, some feel these texts influenced *The Gospel of John* (Dart 1988:xvi).

6. Purpose

The purpose of this study is both academic as well as personal. The primary purpose of the study is academic, that is to add the idea of Jesus teaching on the resurrection in the Gospel of John to the current scholarly trend of seeing His teaching only in light of incipient Gnosticism and the Nag Hammadi library. Hence, new light will be shed on the new history of religions school, modern scholarly methodology, and recent archeological discoveries that have come to challenge and even undermine the faith of some in the canonical literature.

Analysis of Nag Hammadi texts and exegesis of Scripture will enable me to enhance my own ministry as a teacher of young people in the public school system and at Calvary Chapel. One well known academician candidly admitted that a “lifetime of critical biblical scholarship” had “destroyed” his faith (Stone, J.R. 2000:145). I could never forget the first 16 years of my life where I stumbled about in a spiritual stupor clinging only to that hollow shell of outward religious form devoid of the power of God and His eternal Word. Unfortunately, the legacy of Hymenaeus and Philetus lives on (2 Timothy 2:17-18). They encourage us to follow “new trajectories” which take into account the “complexity of historical developments” like the influence of incipient Gnosticism on John’s Gospel (Koester 2006:269-270). Are we to believe that the *Gospel of John* should lose its place with the other canonical literature because it was influenced by incipient Gnosticism (Morris 1995:59)? And if it is influenced by incipient Gnosticism, what would be the extent of the impact of such an influence? More specifically, what impact on Jesus teaching in the *Gospel of John* on the resurrection of the dead?

7. Design and Methodology

The research design falls under the analysis of texts, religious or literary, in order to understand the meaning of such texts (Mouton 2001:167-8). I will be dealing primarily with textual data. The logical

framework is to use both inductive and deductive logic. First, I will be gathering the data from the extra-canonical literature to generate an understanding about what those texts teach about the resurrection. This will involve inductive logic (Mouton 2001:167). I will also analyze the methods used by modern scholars to interpret those texts. Secondly, I will attempt to test, reject, or validate these interpretations. This will involve deductive logic (Mouton: 2001:167).

Therefore, the methodology will be divided into two stages. The first part (chapter 3) will deal with the epistemological outlook of what Gnosticism is, an analysis of what the *NHC* teach about the resurrection, and an examination of scholarly teaching on incipient Gnosticism and its influence on Jesus' teaching on the resurrection. The methodologies used by those scholars will also be examined. Thus, conceptual or theoretical methodology will be used in the first stage. In the second stage, (chapter 4) the scholarly theories of incipient Gnosticism will be put up against what Jesus taught about the resurrection of the dead in the *Gospel of John* as a test case. Special attention will be paid to the theories of Carsten Colpe and J.H. Charlesworth which tend to challenge a Gnostic backdrop for John's Gospel as well as the methodology used to establish such a backdrop (Green 1977:95-134).

7.1 Conceptual and Theoretical Methodology

- 1) *Epistemology*. A general overview of what Gnosticism and incipient Gnosticism is and its elements as a philosophical foundation that could potentially undermine Jesus' teaching on the resurrection (King 2003:62-3). I will be careful not to analyze Gnosticism as a single heretical sect, but as an entire social phenomenon accompanied by mythic diversity and based on intentional designs (Williams 1991:259-262)(Jonas 2005:27). In addition various scholarly theories on the origin of Gnosticism will be taken into account (Smith 2004:60-64).

- 2) *Analytical*. A careful analysis of various Nag Hammadi writings to determine what the general teaching of Gnosticism on the resurrection of the dead is. It will break down Gnostic theory into its various branches and divergences on its slightly divergent views on the resurrection.
- 3) *Comparative*. The various scholarly theories for dating the extra-canonical literature early as the source of Jesus' teaching will be examined. The comparative approach will help to avoid interpretive bias (Mouton 2001:168). The apocryphal gospels and fragments that will be examined are the ones that most frequently have been given serious consideration as the source of Jesus' teaching (Charlesworth and Evans 1998:480-1). The texts involved include the *The Gospel of Thomas*, *Secret Mark*, *The Gospel of Peter (The Cross Gospel)*, *The Dialogue of the Saviour (The Dialogue Gospel)*, *The Apocryphon (letter) of James*, and *The Gospel of Mary* (Dunn 2003:162-172)(Crossan 1988:xiv-xv). Special attention will be paid to *The Gospel of Thomas* (Witherington 2006:27-34)(Cameron 2004:89-108). This is because *The Gospel of Thomas* has been given more serious attention than any other Nag Hammadi writing as containing the source of Jesus' teaching (Grant 1960:100-107) (Klauck 2003:107-9). In addition, some scholars have dated *The Gospel of Thomas* within the 1st century and have regarded it as a source of Jesus' teaching that is independent of the three Synoptic Gospels (Kloppenborg 1990:88-90). In other words, *The Gospel of Thomas* may represent a primitive source which contains traditions that may have been unknown to the four Evangelists or rejected by them (Lapham 2003:115)(Pagels 2003:34).

Other works that are not as hotly contended as the source of the Jesus tradition such as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, *Infancy Gospel of James*, *Egerton Gospel*, *Gospel Oxyrhynchus 840*, *Gospel Oxyrhynchus 1224*, *Gospel of the Hebrews*, *Gospel of the Ebionites*, *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, *The Fayyum Fragment*, and *Gospel of*

the Nazoreans will be briefly addressed (Miller 1994:367-441) (Hennecke, Schneemelecher, and Wilson 1963). Most scholars date these works from the 2nd century, however some scholars say that they have incorporated material early enough to have influenced John's Gospel (Barrett 1967:31). In addition, there are at least a few scholars who place these works in the earliest stages and as the source of the Jesus tradition (Crossan 1991:427-430). In general the criterion for the inclusion of texts in the discussion is that they must be regarded as the oldest or most influential on the early Jesus tradition (Elliot, J.K. 2006:xiii). The limitation of space for the study must also be taken into consideration.

7.2 Exegetical Methodology

The exegetical step will be a detailed study of each text in John's Gospel related to the resurrection of the dead. The texts will include Jn 2:19-22;3:15-16;5:24-29;6:39-54,68;8:35,53,56;10:28;11:24,25-26,32-43;12:23-25,32-35,50;13:1-3;14:1-3;16:20-22;17:1-5,11,13;20:1-29. All levels of textual analysis will be used.

1. *Source Criticism.* Special attention will be paid to the sources John used. Colpe, in his work *Die Religionsgeschichte Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* attacked the History of Religion School's presupposition that a "Gnostic redeemer myth" laid behind John's Gospel. He did this by showing the sources presumed for the incipient Gnosticism were only present in part (King. 2003:141-147). The methodology used by Colpe where sources are carefully examined, rather than assumed to be historically traceable will be utilized by the researcher (Robinson 1962:289). Colpe was able to show that the attempts made by Bultmann and others in the History of Religions School to recover supposed earlier and pre-Christian sources are entirely speculative (Dodd 1958:98). Colpe uses this methodology in his *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Colpe 1995:239-308).

2. *Historical Criticism.* The researcher will reconstruct the history of the text to determine the background or dependency of the selected texts (Bock and Herrick 2005:205-236). Historical criticism also has to do with the analysis of the historical and supernatural elements in the Gospels concerning Jesus (Porter 2000:31-32). The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) has changed the scholarly opinion about John's Gospel from a 2nd century Greek composition to a late first-century Jewish writing (Charlesworth 1996:65). Special attention will be paid to the connection between the findings from Qumran and the texts from John (Charlesworth. 1990:76-105). The possibility of John's Semitic background will be taken into account (Reed 2003:709-726) (Charlesworth 1988:77-98). Finding Jesus' teaching as having uniqueness in early Judaism will challenge the credibility and use of early Gnostic sources (Charlesworth 1992:9-12). In addition, the possible origin of the doctrine of the resurrection in the DSS or the Qumran community will be addressed (Charlesworth 2006:145-153). Other archeological findings help bring to light the Palestinian background of John's Gospel (Von Wahlde 2006:523-530).
3. *Rhetorical Criticism.* Each of the passages in John will be analyzed for their rational argument pertaining to the resurrection when put up against the incipient Gnostic perspective.
4. *Structural/Form Criticism.* Each passage will be viewed in light of its literary and semantic structure to shed light on Jesus' teaching on the resurrection (Bock 2002:181-187).
5. *Redaction Criticism.* J.H. Charlesworth has defined redaction criticism as the method used by scholars to study the editorial activity of the biblical writers (1991:63-64). Each text will be examined for its theological message. Special attention will be given for the possibility of later theologically motivated editing of the text (Smith 2006:349-350).

6. *Textual Criticism*. When a challenge has been raised to the originality of the text, the researcher will reconstruct the original text. The original languages of primary source material will be utilized when appropriate. This includes both the canonical as well as the extracanonical material.

8. Hypothesis

This study is expected to reveal that Jesus teaching about the resurrection of the dead has both a present (realized) as well as a future (eschatological) aspect to it. Both aspects pertain to Christian believers. In addition, it will reveal that there have been serious scholarly attempts to undermine or completely do away with the doctrine of the resurrection by some NT scholars. This is accomplished by finding the roots of Jesus' teaching in incipient Gnosticism through other gospels and documents which some scholars feel have been improperly ignored (Crossan 1992:ix). However, this study will reveal that the research that has been done and the methodology that has been used by these scholars is flawed.

9. Structure and Timeframe

The study will need five chapters. I have approximated on a 3 year completion date due to the in depth theological history in this area as well as the time it will take for thorough analysis of the primary source material involved. The time frame may vary to some degree depending on the availability of resources.

<i>Chapter Title</i>	<i>Chapter Description</i>	<i>Target Date</i>
1. Introduction	▪ Laying out the research problem and it's parameters.	Jan 2008
2. Literature Review	▪ Positioning the study	August

within contemporary incipient Gnostic research. The study will be positioned within current research on the background and teaching on the resurrection in John's Gospel.

2008

3. Synopsis of the Current Gnostic View

- Conducting a thorough analysis of what Gnosticism is, what the Nag Hammadi codices teach on the resurrection, and the recent scholarly trends to redefined Jesus' teaching as having Gnostic roots.

April 2009

4. Exegesis and background of John's Gospel

- A brief analysis of the background of John's Gospel. In addition a thorough exegesis of Johannine teaching on the resurrection as a test case for the recent scholarly tendency.

Dec 2009

5. Conclusion

- Summarizing the findings and their significance for Christians today.

June 2010

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